

THE END OF THE BEGINNING: ANALYZING THE BATTLES OF EL ALAMEIN (1942)

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ABSTRACT

The Battles of El Alamein in 1942 represent a critical juncture in the Second World War, particularly in the North African theater. These engagements, comprising the First and Second Battles of El Alamein, played a central role in shaping the trajectory of the war by halting the Axis advance thus securing a decisive Allied victory and ending the Axis threat to the Suez Canal and the broader Middle East.

The campaign, led by commanders like Erwin Rommel and Bernard Montgomery, reflected contrasting tactics, logistical challenges, and the transformation from defense to offense, which ultimately decided the fate of the Western Desert campaign.

The two battles demonstrated distinct tactical and strategic approaches: the First Battle was, from the Allied perspective, defensive, halting Axis momentum; while the Second Battle was an Allied offensive that decisively shifted the balance in favor of the Allies. Understanding these battles involves exploring the strategic interests, military preparations, battle tactics, and outcomes that ultimately altered the course of the North African campaign during World War II.

This analysis covers both the First and Second Battles of El Alamein, examining their historical contexts, strategies, forces involved, outcomes, and their broader significance, including their enduring legacy in military history.

KEYWORDS: *Battles of El Alamein*

Article History

Received: 20 Dec 2024 | Revised: 21 Dec 2024 | Accepted: 26 Dec 2024

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND CONTEXT: CONFLICT IN NORTH AFRICA

The North African conflict erupted in 1940 due to Italy's foray into Egypt from its Libyan territory. The stakes were high: the Axis powers aimed to control the Suez Canal, a strategic route linking Europe to the oil-rich Middle East and Asia. Consequent to the defeat of the Italian campaign, Germany intervened to support its ally. The ensuing campaign saw Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, the "Desert Fox," take command of the Afrika Korps and mount a series of aggressive campaigns that pushed the British back into Egypt by mid-1942.

The British Eighth Army, initially under General Claude Auchinleck, struggled against Rommel's brilliant tactics, which combined armoured assaults and mobile warfare to consistently outflank and outmaneuver the Allies. However, by July 1942, Rommel's supply lines were overextended, presenting an opportunity for the British to make a stand at El Alamein—the last defensible position before Alexandria and the Suez Canal.

Axis and Allied Objectives

For the Axis powers, capturing Egypt and the Suez Canal would grant control over Middle Eastern oil fields, threaten the British Colonies and disrupt Allied supply lines. On the other hand, the British sought to defend their colonial holdings and safeguard this route. The El Alamein position, between the Mediterranean and the Qattara Depression, was a defensible location that prevented the Axis from flanking maneuvers, turning it into the focal point of defensive and offensive maneuvers in mid-1942.

First Battle of El Alamein (July 1-27, 1942)

The First Battle of El Alamein, spanning from July 1 to 27, 1942, constituted a crucial impasse in the Western Desert Campaign of World War II. The conflict occurred in the arid deserts of Egypt near the strategically significant town of El Alamein.

The First Battle of El Alamein was fought as Rommel attempted to advance further into Egypt. The British Eighth Army was now commanded directly by General Auchinleck, who replaced Lieutenant-General Neil Ritchie following the Axis successes at the Battle of Gazala and the capture of Tobruk. Rommel, with his Afrika Korps and Italian allies, aimed to press forward and secure key locations in Egypt, thereby threatening British supply routes and the vital Suez Canal. The stakes were high: Axis control over this region would grant them access to Alexandria, Cairo, and, most crucially, the Suez Canal, potentially severing the Allies' critical oil supply routes from the Middle East.

Build-Up to the Battle

After Rommel's victory at Gazala and the capture of Tobruk in June 1942, his Army pushed eastward toward Egypt. However, Rommel's rapid advance stretched his supply lines dangerously thin, making it difficult to sustain momentum. British forces under General Claude Auchinleck fell back to El Alamein, where the narrow desert front reduced the impact of Rommel's mobile tactics. Auchinleck's plan was to hold off Axis forces and buy time for reinforcements.

Key Forces and Equipment

- Axis: Rommel's forces included 116,000 German and Italian soldiers, 540 tanks, and around 500 artillery pieces. These numbers, however, masked serious logistical issues, with supply lines extending over 1,500 miles and fuel shortages hampering mobility.
- Allied: The British Eighth Army, by scooping armies of the Commonwealth nations, managed to organize 150,000 men, over 500 tanks, and artillery sufficient to maintain defensive positions.

The battle took place along a narrow front between the Mediterranean Sea and the Qattara Depression, which provided a natural barrier to any flanking maneuvers. Auchinleck's strategy relied on fortified positions known as "boxes," which were connected by minefields and barbed wire. The goal was to create defensible areas that could withstand Rommel's mobile tactics while leveraging artillery and the limited armour available to support infantry forces.



Figure 1

Map of the Western Desert Battle Area,* showing the locations of El Alamein, Tel el Eisa, and the Qattara Depression. This map provides context to the strategic importance of these locations, particularly the natural barriers that shaped the battlefield.

Axis Offensive and British Defense

Rommel launched a series of attacks, using his experienced Panzer divisions and mechanized infantry to try and break through British lines. However, Auchinleck's defensive tactics, combined with logistical challenges faced by the Axis forces, prevented Rommel from making any significant breakthroughs. The Afrika Korps faced supply shortages that hindered their ability to sustain offensive operations, with long supply lines stretching back to Tripoli in Libya.



Figure 2: Rommel in North Africa (June 1942).

One of the critical aspects of the First Battle was the delay in Axis resupply, especially fuel, which limited Rommel's ability to deploy his armor effectively. Auchinleck managed to capitalize on these weaknesses by organizing strong counter-attacks that targeted overextended Axis units, preventing them from exploiting any gains. Subsequently, after intense fighting, the battle ultimately ended in a stalemate, with neither side gaining a decisive advantage.

Defensive Tactics and Key Engagements

The defensive plan that Auchinleck employed revolved around the concept of "defensive boxes," which were fortified positions that were reinforced with minefields and barbed wire. The Eighth Army established a defensive line that extended from the shore of the Mediterranean Sea to the Qattara Depression, which was inaccessible to the enemy. During the subsequent clashes, both sides suffered tremendous fatalities; nonetheless, British forces were able to successfully

rebuff Rommel's efforts to break through the defences. The gallant stand that the 18th Indian Infantry Brigade made at Deir el Shein was a moment that ought to be remembered. Despite being vastly outnumbered, they managed to maintain their position and buy themselves some valuable time.

KEY PHASES OF THE BATTLE

Initial Attacks (1–3 July)

The battle began on July 1, with the Axis forces launching an initial assault aimed at breaking the El Alamein line. The 90th Light Infantry Division attempted to advance north to cut off the coastal road but encountered fierce resistance from the South African 1st Division. Concurrently, the Panzer divisions, hampered by sandstorms and RAF airstrikes, struggled to make progress. Rommel's initial thrusts were repelled, leading to a reassessment of his plans.

Mid-Battle Maneuvers (4–10 July)

During this phase, Allied forces initiated counter-attacks aimed at disrupting Rommel's lines, with significant RAF support. Allied sorties focused on Axis supply lines, particularly targeting routes back to Benghazi, which severely impacted Axis reinforcement efforts. Rommel's forces found themselves increasingly constrained by fuel and equipment shortages.

Final Phase (11–27 July)

As the battle approached its final stages, the Allies maintained their defensive hold around Tel el Eisa and Ruweisat Ridge. Despite repeated Axis efforts to break the Allied line, Rommel's forces—already weakened and short on supplies—failed to make a significant impact. By late July, Rommel reluctantly shifted to a defensive posture, effectively ending Axis attempts to penetrate deeper into Egypt.

KEY OUTCOMES OF THE FIRST BATTLE

- **Inconclusive Result:** The First Battle of El Alamein ended without a decisive victory for either side. However, it was significant in halting the Axis advance toward Cairo and the Suez Canal.
- **Attrition and Exhaustion:** Both sides suffered heavy casualties, but the Axis forces were particularly affected by logistical problems, which limited their ability to continue offensive operations.
- **Impact on Morale:** The British were able to stabilize the front, which provided a much-needed boost to morale after the series of defeats leading up to this point. For the Axis, the inability to break through marked the beginning of a decline in their fortunes in North Africa.

Outcome and Aftermath

Though tactically inconclusive, the First Battle of El Alamein marked a strategic halt to Rommel's eastward advance. The Allies suffered over 13,000 casualties, including significant losses in the New Zealand and Indian divisions, but captured approximately 7,000 Axis prisoners and inflicted severe equipment losses. This result dealt a blow to Rommel's momentum, preventing further incursions into Egypt and setting the stage for a decisive confrontation in the Second Battle of El Alamein.

SECOND BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN (OCTOBER 23 - NOVEMBER 4, 1942)

The Second Battle of El Alamein marked a major shift from defense to offense for the Allies. By August 1942, Winston Churchill had lost patience with the slow progress in North Africa and replaced Auchinleck with Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery. Montgomery immediately set about reorganizing the Eighth Army, improving its morale, and preparing for a major offensive to push the Axis forces out of Egypt.

Montgomery's Preparations and Strategy

Montgomery's approach was characterized by meticulous planning and overwhelming force. He was determined to avoid the mistakes of previous campaigns, which had often involved hastily planned and poorly supported offensives. Montgomery's preparations included:

- **Reorganization of Forces:** Montgomery restructured the Eighth Army, bringing in new divisions, replacing commanders, and improving coordination with the Desert Air Force. He ensured that the army was well-equipped, with new Sherman tanks arriving from the United States, which provided a significant advantage in firepower.
- **Building Superiority:** Montgomery built up his forces to ensure numerical and material superiority over Rommel. By the time of the battle, the Allies had amassed 190,000 troops, over 1,000 tanks, 900 artillery pieces, and 1,400 anti-tank guns. In contrast, Rommel's depleted Panzer Army Africa, now with around 116,000 troops, 540 tanks, and defenses centered around fortified positions and deep minefields (the "Devil's Gardens").

THE BATTLE: OPERATION LIGHTFOOT AND SUPERCHARGE

The Second Battle of El Alamein was Launched in Two Phases

1. Operation Lightfoot (October 23-28, 1942): The initial phase of the battle involved a massive artillery bombardment followed by infantry attacks to clear paths through the extensive minefields that protected Rommel's positions. The name "Lightfoot" referred to the plan of sending infantry first, as they were light enough not to trigger the mines, followed by tanks through the cleared corridors.

Progression of the Battle:

- The bombardment began on the night of October 23, with more than 800 artillery pieces firing on Axis positions. This was one of the largest artillery barrages of the war, designed to disorient the defenders and create openings for the infantry.
- The infantry, primarily from the 30th Corps, advanced under cover of darkness, working to clear the minefields. The Axis forces, well entrenched in defensive positions, put up stiff resistance, and progress was slow and costly.

2. Operation Supercharge (November 1-4, 1942): Following the initial attrition phase, Montgomery launched Operation Supercharge to break through the last of the Axis defenses. The objective was to open a gap wide enough for Allied armor to exploit, thereby forcing a decisive confrontation with Rommel's remaining forces.

Progression of the Battle

- **Breakthrough and Retreat:** After several days of intense fighting, the Allied forces achieved a breakthrough on November 4.

- Rommel, recognizing the hopelessness of the situation, requested permission to retreat, but initially received orders from Hitler to stand and fight. Nevertheless, Rommel began withdrawing his forces, with the bulk of his motorized units managing to escape, though much of his infantry was captured.
- Axis Countermeasures and Leadership Struggles: During the battle, Rommel was absent due to illness, leaving General Georg Stumme in charge. Rommel returned only after Stumme's death mid-battle, but by then, Axis defenses were critically strained. Hitler's "stand and die" order complicated Rommel's retreat plans, leading to further Axis losses.

Key Outcomes of the Second Battle

- Decisive Allied Victory: The Second Battle of El Alamein was a turning point in the North African campaign. It marked the first major, clear-cut victory for the British and Commonwealth forces against the Axis, forcing Rommel to retreat westward into Libya.
- Strategic Significance: The victory at El Alamein ended the Axis threat to Egypt and the Suez Canal, securing British control over the Middle East and safeguarding vital supply routes. It also set the stage for Operation Torch, the Allied landings in North Africa that would further pressure the Axis forces from the west.
- Boost to Allied Morale: The victory provided a significant boost to British morale, both at home and among the troops. Churchill famously remarked, "Before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein, we never had a defeat."

Comparative Analysis of the Two Battles

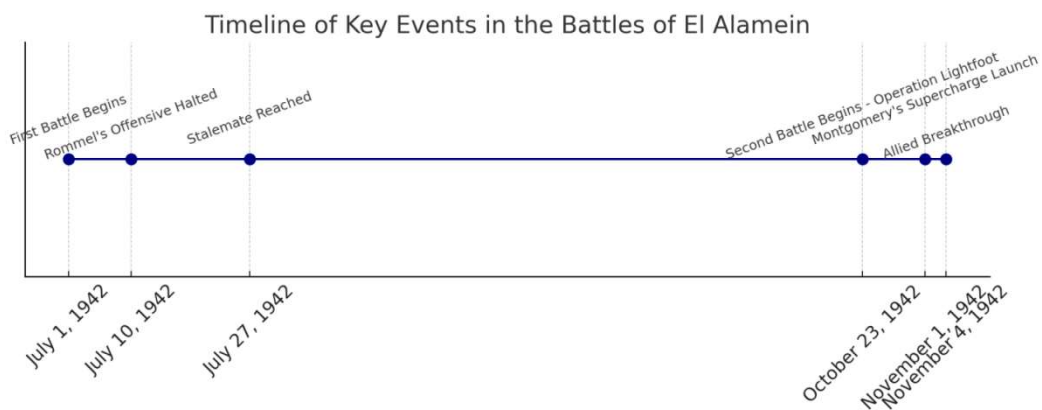


Figure 3

This timeline chart highlights the key dates and events in the First and Second Battles of El Alamein. It shows the progression from the initial stalemate in July 1942 to the decisive Allied breakthrough in November, detailing the phases like the start of Operation Lightfoot and the launch of Operation Supercharge.

Forces and Equipment

- **First Battle:** The Axis forces, under Rommel, were initially better equipped and had the momentum, but they were hampered by long supply lines and a shortage of reinforcements. The British Eighth Army, though on the defensive, utilized fortified positions to compensate for their earlier defeats.

- **Second Battle:** By the time of the Second Battle, the Allies had achieved a significant numerical and qualitative advantage. The arrival of Sherman tanks from the United States provided a much-needed boost to the Eighth Army's armored capabilities, enabling them to overpower Axis tank units during the offensive.

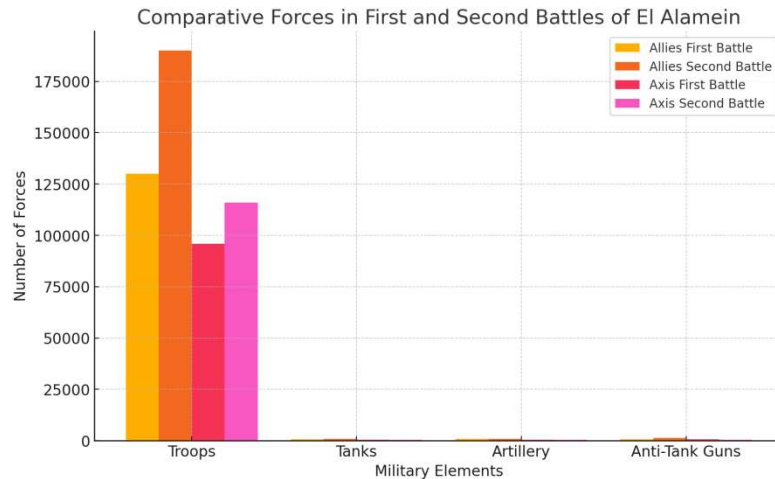


Figure 4

This bar chart compares the military forces involved in the First and Second Battles of El Alamein, highlighting the differences in troop numbers, tanks, artillery, and anti-tank guns between the Allies and Axis forces. It illustrates the significant buildup in Allied forces before the Second Battle, which contributed to their success.

STRATEGIC APPROACHES OF THE ALLIES

First Battle of El-Alamein (July 1–27, 1942)

- **Establishing a defensive line:** The Allies, under General Claude Auchinleck, aimed to halt the Axis advance by establishing a strong defensive line at El-Alamein. The geographical advantage of the narrow coastal strip, bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north and the impassable Qattara Depression to the south, limited Rommel's ability to outflank the Allied positions.
- **Utilization of Terrain:** The Allies effectively used the natural terrain to their advantage, constructing defensive fortifications and minefields to bolster their positions and slow down the Axis advance.
- **Reinforcement and Resupply:** Auchinleck focused on reinforcing his forces and ensuring adequate supplies, which were critical for sustaining the defense against the Axis forces, who were themselves facing logistical challenges.
- **Attrition Warfare:** The strategy involved wearing down the Axis forces through continuous engagement and attrition, exploiting their stretched supply lines and limited resources.

Second Battle of El-Alamein (October 23 – November 11, 1942)

- **Preparation and Build-Up:** Under the command of General Bernard Montgomery, the Allies undertook a meticulous build-up of forces, achieving significant numerical superiority in troops, tanks, artillery, and air power. This preparation was crucial for launching a successful offensive.

- **Deception (Operation Bertram):** The Allies employed extensive deception tactics to mislead the Axis about the timing and location of the main attack. This included the use of dummy tanks and supply dumps to disguise the true strength and disposition of Allied forces.
- **Artillery Barrage (Operation Lightfoot):** The battle began with a massive artillery bombardment aimed at destroying Axis defenses and minefields. The goal was to create corridors through which Allied infantry and armor could advance.
- **Breakthrough and Exploitation:** Montgomery's plan involved a two-phase attack. The initial phase focused on breaking through the Axis defensive line, and the second phase aimed at exploiting the breach by advancing armored divisions to encircle and defeat the Axis forces.
- **Sustained Pressure:** The Allies maintained constant pressure on the Axis forces, preventing them from regrouping or counterattacking effectively. This relentless assault eventually forced Rommel to order a retreat.
- The strategic approaches in both battles were characterized by a combination of defensive resilience and offensive planning, with the Second Battle of El-Alamein marking a decisive turning point in the North African campaign.

Strategic Approaches Adopted by Rommel

Rommel's tactics reflected both his strengths and the constraints he faced.

First Battle

- **Offensive Push:** Rommel's strategy was initially offensive, aiming to break through British defenses and advance toward the Suez Canal. He sought to capitalize on the momentum gained from earlier victories in North Africa.
- **Direct Assaults:** Rommel launched direct assaults against the British Eighth Army, hoping to penetrate their lines. His forces focused on exploiting weaknesses in the British defenses.
- **Adaptation to Defense:** As the battle progressed, Rommel was forced into a defensive posture due to the strong resistance from the British forces and his own logistical challenges including limited supplies and reinforcements, overstretched supply lines and shortages of fuel and ammunition which affected his ability to sustain prolonged offensives. He aimed to hold his ground and prevent the British from launching a successful counteroffensive.

Second Battle of El-Alamein (October 23 – November 11, 1942)

- **Defensive Preparations:** Anticipating a major British offensive, Rommel prepared extensive defensive positions. He ordered the construction of minefields, known as "devil's gardens," and fortified his lines with anti-tank defenses to slow down the British advance.
- **Counterattacks:** Despite being ill and initially absent from the battlefield, Rommel returned to lead counterattacks against the British forces. He aimed to disrupt their advances and exploit any overextensions.
- **Tactical Withdrawal:** As the battle progressed and it became clear that the British forces, under General Bernard Montgomery, had superior numbers and resources, Rommel attempted to conduct a strategic withdrawal to preserve his army. His goal was to regroup and maintain a cohesive fighting force.

- **Orders from Hitler:** Rommel's ability to execute a full withdrawal was hampered by Adolf Hitler's orders to hold his ground at all costs. This directive led to significant losses for the Axis forces as they were unable to retreat in an organized manner.
- Overall, Rommel's strategies at El-Alamein reflected a combination of offensive ambition and defensive pragmatism, shaped by the logistical realities and strategic directives he faced. Despite his tactical ingenuity, the overwhelming material and numerical superiority of the Allied forces ultimately led to his defeat in the Second Battle of El-Alamein, marking a turning point in the North African campaign

LOGISTICAL CONCERNS

The supply lines and logistical challenges faced by both the Axis and Allied forces during the battles of El Alamein, are as under:

Axis Supply Lines

- **Origin:** The primary Axis supply lines originated from Europe, particularly Italy. Supplies had to be shipped across the Mediterranean Sea to North Africa.
- **Ports:** Key ports such as Tripoli, Benghazi, and Tobruk were used for receiving supplies. However, these ports were often targeted by Allied air and naval forces, disrupting the supply chain.
- **Desert Transport:** Once supplies reached North African ports, they had to be transported across long distances through the desert to reach the front lines near El Alamein. This involved traversing hundreds of miles, which was logistically challenging and time-consuming.
- **Vulnerability:** The Axis supply lines were vulnerable to Allied air raids and naval blockades, which frequently disrupted the flow of essential supplies like fuel, ammunition, and food.

Allied Supply Lines

- **Origin:** The Allies had shorter and more secure supply lines. Supplies were shipped from Britain and other Allied territories to Egypt.
- **Ports:** Alexandria and Port Said were major ports used by the Allies, providing relatively secure and efficient access to the front lines.
- **Infrastructure:** The Allies benefited from better infrastructure, including railways and roads, which facilitated the movement of supplies from ports to the front lines at El Alamein.
- **Air and Naval Superiority:** The Allies had air and naval superiority in the Mediterranean, reducing the threat to their supply lines and allowing for more consistent and reliable resupply operations.

Logistical Challenges and Advantages

- **Axis Challenges:** Rommel's forces were often stretched thin due to the long supply lines, which were prone to disruption. The lack of adequate supplies, particularly fuel, severely limited the operational capabilities of the Axis forces.

- **Allied Advantages:** Montgomery's forces enjoyed a relative logistical advantage with shorter supply lines and better protection. This allowed for the buildup of significant resources and reinforcements, contributing to the eventual success in the Second Battle of El Alamein.
- By understanding these logistical dynamics, one can appreciate the strategic challenges and advantages faced by both sides during the battles of El Alamein.

Casualty Breakdown

First Battle of El-Alamein (July 1–27, 1942)

- **Allied Casualties:** Approximately 13,000
- **Axis Casualties:** Approximately 10,000

The First Battle of El-Alamein was marked by heavy fighting and attrition, with both sides suffering significant casualties. The battle ended in a stalemate, with the Allies successfully halting the Axis advance.

Second Battle of El-Alamein (October 23 – November 11, 1942)

- **Allied Casualties:** Approximately 13,500
- **Axis Casualties:** Approximately 30,000 (including killed, wounded, and captured)

These figures highlight the attritional nature of the First Battle of El-Alamein and the significant losses experienced by the Axis during the Second Battle, which contributed to the eventual Allied success in North Africa.

CONCLUSIONS

The Battles of El Alamein: Their Legacy and Significance

The Battles of El Alamein are critical events in the history of the Second World War, especially within the North African Campaign. The triumph at the Second Battle of El Alamein, famously described by Winston Churchill as “the end of the beginning,” is considered a pivotal turning point in the Allied campaign against the Axis powers. In addition to its rhetorical and symbolic significance, the victory was tactically crucial, safeguarding British interests in the Middle East, revitalising Allied morale, and establishing the foundation for Operation Torch—the Allied invasion of French North Africa. These events signified a pivotal change in the Axis's fortunes, prompting a withdrawal that would lead to their ultimate loss on the African continent. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's command at the Second Battle of El Alamein secured his reputation as a competent and effective military leader. His methodical and prudent approach has sparked discussion among historians and military experts; yet, his focus on meticulous preparation, effective logistical coordination, and the amalgamation of air and ground troops characterised modern military strategy. Montgomery's strategy not only ensured the Allies' material dominance but also leveraged their capacity to effectively concentrate resources and personnel, resulting in a decisive triumph. The methodical destruction of Axis defences at El Alamein highlighted the significance of thorough operational planning in influencing the results of extensive military encounters.

The strategic significance of the Battles of El Alamein extends beyond their immediate military outcomes. The First Battle of El Alamein, fought in mid-1942, effectively halted the advance of Axis forces under General Erwin Rommel, thereby ending the string of successes that had characterized the German and Italian campaigns in North Africa.

This marked a critical juncture in the theater, as it signaled the loss of Axis momentum. The Second Battle, fought later that year, decisively shifted the balance of power in favor of the Allies, enabling them to regain the strategic initiative and neutralize the Axis threat to Egypt and the broader Middle East. Together, these engagements underscored the transformative potential of well-executed defensive and offensive operations.

Politically and psychologically, the success at El Alamein had profound ramifications. The victory restored confidence in British leadership and military efficacy, both within the United Kingdom and across the Allied powers. Domestically, it revitalized public morale, which had been battered by earlier setbacks in the war. On the international stage, it reinforced the credibility of the British military and positioned the Commonwealth forces as capable of achieving significant victories independently, without direct American involvement. This achievement held particular importance in the early stages of the Allied partnership, strengthening the cohesion and resolve of the coalition.

Moreover, the success at El Alamein set the stage for subsequent Allied operations in North Africa. Operation Torch, launched shortly after the battle, marked the entry of American forces into the North African theater and facilitated a coordinated Allied campaign that ultimately led to the defeat of Axis forces in Tunisia by May 1943. This sequence of events underscored the interconnectedness of military campaigns and the strategic foresight required to sustain momentum across multiple theaters of war.

The battles also exposed the inherent limitations of the Axis campaign in North Africa. Despite his tactical acumen, General Rommel was hampered by inadequate logistical support and the immense challenges of maintaining supply lines across the vast and inhospitable desert terrain. The defeat at El Alamein highlighted the critical importance of robust supply chains and resource management, factors that ultimately constrained the operational effectiveness of Axis forces and rendered their position untenable.

In the broader context of the Second World War, the Battles of El Alamein are remembered as defining moments that demonstrated the resilience and resolve of the Allied forces. These engagements marked the first major land victories achieved by British and Commonwealth forces independently of American direct involvement, symbolizing a turning point in the global conflict. Churchill's characterization of El Alamein as "the end of the beginning" aptly captures its historical significance, reflecting the transition from a period of uncertainty and defensive measures to one of strategic initiative and eventual Allied ascendancy.

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